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LINCOLN AND HAMLET

BY JOHN JAY CHAPMAN

AFTER reading all one day about Abraham Lincoln, and going to see *Hamlet* on the next, I was struck by certain resemblances between the two characters, and I began to ponder over the universal popularity of each of them. The world seems to adore problem characters, men in whom there are several natures and who pass from one mood into the next through a point that crackles with electrical fire, a point where grief and smiles meet—sometimes in a torrent or blast of feeling and more often in a mere silent flash of transition. It is this crackling point that puzzles the world and delights it too. The incongruous has in it something of the divine. You meet this in Byron's letters, but not in his poetry. If Byron's humor could have run into his verses quite spontaneously, *Don Juan* would have been a classic. In Hamlet and in Lincoln there is a constant fizz and sparkle, a mingling of streams and some new surprise of nature at every moment. We always understand, and yet we can never explain. This motley seems to be what humanity requires in a truly popular human character.

It should be noted as often as possible that the one thing in the world which is always spontaneous is humor. There is no substitute for humor, no imitation that deceives us. It is the one thing that pierces the iron sides of hypocrisy; black coats and long faces cannot resist it. Nay, they evoke and create it; they draw the lightning. Humor is a mystery, and the ubiquity of humor in Shakespeare's plays is what makes them great and—from the point of view of pure reason—incomprehensible. They are the mirage of literature; you cannot sail up to them.

One resemblance between Hamlet and Lincoln is due to the chasm that separates each of them from the rest of the characters in the play, and this chasm is what gives rise to

the jets of wit and pathos that leap across it. The immense friendliness and affectionateness of both these characters and their yearning towards everyone—as shown, for instance, in Hamlet's greeting of the players and in Lincoln's dealings with all mankind—unites them in our mind; though it must be admitted that Hamlet was often irritable, and Lincoln always as kind as summer. But both men are helplessly moody, and moods are what fascinate the world. Men wish to unravel the mystery. Now the truth is that neither did Shakespeare understand Hamlet, nor did Lincoln comprehend himself. But we—we are the jury—we positively must understand. Hence the two great literatures of these two great subjects.

A morbid, slightly hysterical, poetic temperament, a mind intensely analytical yet gifted with an intrusive lightning humor that made it see the fallacy before it had time to state the proposition, a mind burdened with a practical responsibility and over-charged with feeling—such was Hamlet, and Lincoln differs from him chiefly in this, that he lacked Hamlet's philosophic power, and that he had in its stead a religious faith which pulled him through in the end and made a practical man of him. In the meantime, however, Lincoln was always weaving his little thread, striving to find some fiber that would hold. He was a doctrinaire and maintained a thesis, which he sleeplessly revised for years, like a man making an aeroplane. It was a thing built for the special winds of the epoch, and he kept adding wheels and gauges to it from time to time. It was a political, not a philosophic machine; but it was driven by the popular passions of an important epoch, and was able to take up their power and utilize them. For this reason it is forever interesting. It is the old republican dynamo—of the model of 1850-60.

Lincoln's mind could see a political idea only when it was above the political horizon—or was just nearly about to rise. He was caged and controlled by the conviction that *there must be a United States*—a thought which would never have given Hamlet a moment's pause or concern. Lincoln starts out with his conclusion and labors handsomely, honestly, painfully at the structure of his argument. He always reminds me of a very knowing mountain mule, who is picking his way up a rocky road amid the loose stones, and carrying a heavy and precious load upon his back, while

precipices yawn below at every turn. But he is mountain-bred. Have no fear for him. He is domestic here and has trod these hills as a colt. He knows every peak and cranny of the land. The landscape is bleak and rugged, the habitations humble, scattered and uniform. It is a sad land, without our cathedrals, theatres, or the charms of a domestic civilization. I have always wondered why Lincoln stopped short in his education; for surely the Bible, Shakespeare and Weems' Life of Washington were enough to introduce him to the whole of literature. He could have obtained books. Scott and Byron and Boswell's Johnson were in some vogue in the Eastern States. He was a hard student in his single line of slavery and the Constitution. He was used all his life to go to libraries and read biographies and memoirs about his one subject. But he seems to have lacked any large intellectual curiosity, and the traditional explanation of this lack—the meagreness of his surroundings—is not convincing. In Lincoln's situation, Franklin would have imported books—from Europe if necessary. It is needful to point out this quality of Lincoln's mind, because the whole subject has been reduced to a series of legends or traditional views. Lord Charnwood's charming book is individual, picturesque and fresh. It is written in a hand-made, self-taught, colloquial spirit that makes us love the author. He brings to bear the light of long study and of patient thought upon Lincoln's temperament and personal characteristics; and in this Lord Charnwood is original. The novel touches and happiness of the book concern details. But in matters of politics the author's mind is subdued to what it works in, it is saturated with American feeling, and speaks from the conventional point of view. It is deficient in big ideas. When Lord Charnwood comes face to face with the Sybil of History he turns away with some euphemism of the sentimental English school of thought—a thing that is moral and polite, but says nothing. Such an occasion arises, of course, with regard to John Brown.

The American Abolition question in the United States began in 1829 and rumbled along for thirty years, and was vaguely understood in Europe, somewhat as a Russian revolution is followed in America. But when in 1859 John Brown's Raid fell like a bolt from the sky, men in Europe were startled. A great bell had tolled. An elemental shock had rolled out of America, an appeal to humanity.

As was to be expected, those who were near the instrument were bad judges of the size and carrying power of its tone. Lincoln himself, being caged in his problems of tangible politics, was obtuse to the meaning of John Brown's Raid; and Lord Charnwood, in commenting on this obtuseness, says: "With a very clear conscience we refuse to take example from these men (like John Brown), whose very defects have operated in them as a special call; but undoubtedly most of us regard them with a warmth of sympathy which we are slow to accord to safer guides." This is an empty compliment. Except where great dramatic, spiritual ideas are in issue Lord Charnwood is a good commentator. His notes on Hamlet's madness, on his relations to Ophelia, to the grave-diggers, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are apt and excellent. But when Lord Charnwood touches upon the great argument that stalks behind the whole drama, the bloody crime—a brother's murder—that ghost of Hamlet's father, that spectre of impending retribution—the Slavery Question—Lord Charnwood is feeble. The subject is disturbing, ungente and vast. Lord Charnwood came not here to discuss that. And yet that ghost is at the bottom of every incident in the play. The ghost is always on the stage; and the drama of Lincoln's life consisted in this, that he could never frame a philosophy that would include the ghost. He did not understand the gist of his own life's role till the curtain had fallen on the war, and everyone understood the plot of the whole great play.

Lincoln never understood the Slavery Question. He was always bent on preserving the Union with or without slavery. Slavery had been accorded certain rights under the original Constitution, and Lincoln's panacea was that all parties should go back to those conditions and live as happily as they could. This was a logical, legal-minded notion; but it failed to take facts into account. The whole world had changed since the oak of the United States had been planted in a pot with an iron band of slavery about the brim. Slavery was at war with democratic institutions, slavery was at war with the mind of the world, slavery must go. The Southern Autocracy, which loomed so large in the thoughts of our half-educated ancestors, was a little group of benighted pirates left, as it were, on an island. That group had no future; no place in the sun awaited it. The notion of preserving slavery because it was provided for in

the Constitution of the United States was the thought of illiterate men; and illiteracy qualifies the whole political history of the United States between 1830 and 1860.

Had Lincoln in his youth seen the problem in the larger light, had he seen that slavery was doomed, he might never have been President; but his enormous mental powers would have been exercised freely instead of being employed in bolstering up a thesis which was essentially false. He had, in fact, such gigantic natural powers that I believe his utterances would have brought the brains of Europe to our rescue, and that the whole subject of slavery in America would have been dragged to the light and settled—by war, of course—sooner than it was. But Lincoln's brain was cramped by the poison of the very institution that he opposed. He could not see that the Constitution of the United States was a fetish, and that he himself was like a superstitious woman who was clinging to a rag doll during a tempest at sea.

Lincoln had moments of illumination which the historians have made the most of, but his habits of self-suppression and his belief in his doctrine besieged him and the light would flicker and go out. For some reason, it is always regarded as an extraordinary manifestation of virtue if a politician ever takes a course which is contrary to his apparent political interest, even if it accords with a larger ambition. And thus the occasions on which Lincoln allowed the views of the Abolitionists to trickle into his speeches are pointed to as examples of wonderful heroism. In particular, Lincoln's speech about "the house divided against itself," and his prophecy that the Union was destined to become all slave or all free, is always cited as an instance of wonderful courage and wonderful insight. But this speech was made at the time that the Republican party was being formed; and the Abolitionists had been shouting similar prophecies from the housetops for twenty-five years. It was due to their vociferation that the idea at last leaked into Lincoln; and due to their influence on the voters in 1858 that he found courage to utter it. The Abolitionists are forgotten, because they were monotonous, like the murmur of the sea, a continuous, distributive, pounding influence. They were dreadfully unpleasant at the time, and what they created with their pounding was atmospheric, it was a substance which only very imaginative historians

can perceive. Thus it has been lost, and Lincoln is represented as acting *in vacuo*.

Lincoln's inability to see the deeper issue behind the politics of his times could be illustrated from any one of his speeches, but is best seen in its nakedness at the time when he took office as President. At this time the long threatened eruption of the volcano was in full blast. Half a dozen States had seceded, Sumter was besieged, the Constitution was in tatters.

Yet Lincoln was among those who offered to *woo the seceding States back again* by a special amendment to the Constitution which should give them additional guarantees, and copper-fasten their sacred rights in some particular way. This was like offering a nosegay to a mad bull, but it was logical and legal-minded. All that can be said for Lincoln in a philosophic point of view is that he reflected the most advanced views possible to the *political* mind in his country.

Lincoln threw into political life as much as that life could carry of the liberal thought of a most benighted age. He did this with the genius of perhaps the greatest popular speaker and demonstrator in history. Our people are in the habit of saying that if Lincoln had been more profound he wouldn't have been understood. I do not believe this; I believe merely that if he had been more profound he could not have held office.

The insoluble question in history is the question how far any ruler is the victim of public opinion and how far public opinion is the victim of him. Let any one read at leisure Lincoln's First Inaugural, and try to determine just how courageous Lincoln was or how discreet, just how much promise of a strong Government there was in this speech, and how much concession to the insolence of the South and to the timidity of the North. One would have to read all the newspapers of the United States during the previous thirty years in order to make a good guess at such a matter, and even that would not suffice. One must have been alive at the time of the speech. And even if all this could be done, each one of us would decide the point according to his temperament. Such is the study of history.

In the Great War which has just closed, we have all lived through an epoch of action and reaction between a democratic executive and his people, which has left the

matter a mystery. One cannot help wondering what the historians will make of it. The present generation will remember the hammering that Mr. Wilson got, the speeches, the meetings, the memorials, the rage, the outcry—the voice of the people as it dinned the popular will into Mr. Wilson. All this clamor is as much a part of history as the conduct of the Executive. The speeches of Mr. Wilson will be accessible, of course; but to later generations the other side of the dialogue—what the people said—will be lost in the murmur of the sea.

There is one great difference between the procession of Lincoln's speeches and the procession of Mr. Wilson's speeches. All of Lincoln's speeches are parts of a single argument, even the earliest ones show traces of his latest thoughts. In the course of the Civil War Lincoln's philosophy developed very little. When the time came, it simply busted, like the one hoss shay; and he did what was necessary in regard to the great abuse, slavery. As to Mr. Wilson's speeches on the Great War, I doubt if the human mind can piece them together into any coherence. Each is a prophetic deliverance, and if you should put them in a pile one on top of the other, they would destroy one another and give you zero as a result. Nevertheless, Mr. Wilson's final attitude was the decisive one, so far as politics went, and the earlier speeches are expunged. The process by which this was done will be invisible to posterity, like the actinic rays which stain the photographic plate but which the eye cannot see.

Of the two men, Mr. Wilson's mind is far more normal and far less interesting than Lincoln's. Mr. Wilson is no Samson Agonistes brooding over Israel, but a ready electrical machine that obeys major currents. In Lincoln's place Wilson would have responded to the winning current (namely, to the Northern determination to win the war) sooner than Lincoln did; for Lincoln's dread of moving faster than public opinion was turbid, morbid and more elephantine than Wilson's similar fear. The hesitation Lincoln showed in relieving Fort Sumter is to my mind as exasperating as Mr. Wilson's treatment of the Invasion of Belgium during the first year of the war.

Lincoln's political timidity has had an evil influence upon American character from his day to our own. I have never been in an American reform movement in which Lin-

coln's example was not quoted daily as a reason for doing nothing at all; and it is quite certain that the precedent of 1860 had a powerful influence in preventing our Administration from preparing for war in 1914. If Lincoln had in 1861 adopted the tone of Andrew Jackson in calling on the North to put down the rebellion, the Civil War would have been shorter. This is no more than saying that if Hamlet had been a sensible young man he would have had his uncle, the bad King, indicted for murder, would have married Ophelia and lived happily ever after. But we should have had no play of Hamlet. And if Lincoln had been a good executive, we should have had no Lincoln.

To illustrate his inefficiency I will quote the much-admired closing lines of the First Inaugural. At the time that Lincoln spoke them the South was in arms and organized. The authority of the United States had been openly defied for more than two months:

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

These lines have a certain lyrical beauty, they are a fine soliloquy. Lincoln seems to be debating inwardly "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them." But as a call to the patriotism of the North to help put down a criminal rebellion, the lines are flat; and if regarded as a threat to a province actually in revolt, they are ludicrous. They would tend to incite any manly revolutionist to unusual activity.

Mr. Wilson's early pacifism, his advice to us not to think about Belgium, his "too proud to fight," "America first," "peace without victory," etc., had a sting in them. They were a tonic. But Lincoln's words are the drowsy syrups of the east; John-a-Dreams (as Hamlet calls himself) is in them. And yet Lincoln was longing to arouse the war-spirit in the North, and Wilson feared to arouse that spirit in his countrymen. The moral of both cases is the same.

The American people is slow, but sensible: war was in each case necessary, and the people would have fought and won the war, no matter who had been President.

But a deeper truth hovers over the outcome. There is a *rationale* in this apparent inefficiency of democracy; there is a spiritual law at the bottom of this exasperating slowness of America. You might express the matter thus: Poetry is more important than prose. Poetry endures, prose fades and vanishes. As for Mr. Wilson's utterances, it is too soon yet to hazard a guess as to which class—prose or verse—they belong to. Upon whatever wind it was that he rose, he soars today in such a heaven of contemporary fame as no modern man has ever reached before. At what point he will alight is as yet unimaginable.

Lincoln has passed into the domestic lore and love of mankind. He was a saint, a prophetic nature, a humorist, a sage, and a peasant. He spent much time upon his knees, and much time in personal chat with thousands of people. In his conversations, in his speeches, in his letters, his personality was ever greater than the occasion, and greater than his dogma. He spoke in fables and parables. His state documents contain passages of grotesque, spontaneous, powerful humor which split a subject open—sudden human appeals that are like certain lines in Robert Burns' songs, they smite. He seems to have lived in that detachment of spirit which expresses itself in homely figures, and shows that the profoundest truths are ever the nearest truths.

Lincoln survives in personal anecdotes, like one of the great figures of antiquity, and later generations seem to crawl in and out of his pockets. The history of the Civil War is chiefly read in order that Lincoln may be understood and enjoyed. His mind lights up the epoch, and when the illumination of that mind was quenched, the times become sad, complex and uninteresting. The Muse of History has closed her book.

JOHN JAY CHAPMAN.